

History
UNFOLDING

VIETNAM

OUR LONGEST WAR: PART 2



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Vietnam, Our Longest War: Part 2

Introduction

Vietnam: A Long Road Home

The first part of our two-part booklet set on Vietnam took the story up through the Tet Offensive of 1968. That turning point represented a military and political defeat for the Vietnamese communists, even as it also represented a political and military crisis for the United States. Tet made Americans aware of the tenacity of their foe in Vietnam, and at the same time it raised painful doubts about the credibility of the U.S. officials who had led the nation to war there.

From that point on, the U.S. began slowly to extricate itself from Vietnam. However, under Richard Nixon, it did so in a complicated and often violent way. The chaos of the Nixon years—with detente and trips to China mixed in with Watergate and other scandals—may have distorted the way we think of the end of the Vietnam War. Vietnamization was working to a greater degree than most people realized. Historians will long debate whether or not it would have succeeded had conditions been different. In any case, by 1973, the U.S. Congress had given up on South Vietnam. From that point on its fate was more or less sealed.

Today, the pain of the war still deeply affects how we remember it. We hope this two-part booklet set will help fix it more firmly in the historical memories of a new generation far removed from these events, yet still profoundly shaped by them.

The War at Home

Tet, the Chicago Democratic convention and radical and moderate anti-war activists all made the late 1960s a time of turmoil and confusion. The illustrations here focus on these events at home.

Vietnamization

Under General Creighton Abrams, the policy of Vietnamization altered the nature of the war and gave Americans reason to hope that South Vietnam might yet be able to unite and resist a total communist victory.

War and Talk

Under Nixon, all the U.S. ground troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. But talks in Paris were punctuated by massive air campaigns and the incursion into Cambodia. These events kept anti-war sentiment at a boil even as a flawed but real cease-fire was being negotiated.

The Fall and the Aftermath

After the agreement was signed, the withdrawal of all U.S. support for South Vietnam all but guaranteed the collapse of that regime once North Vietnam again attacked. Today, painful memories of this war persist. The North was victorious, but no one really triumphed. The legacy of Vietnam is still with us all today.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

Vietnam, Our Longest War: Part 2

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will understand how deeply divided Americans were over Vietnam by the late 1960s.
 2. Students will analyze and debate the various anti-war views adopted by opponents of the Vietnam War.
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The War at Home

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Illustration 1

By 1968, U.S. officials had been speaking for two years about a “light at the end of the tunnel” in Vietnam. Victory was supposedly in sight. Then came the Tet Offensive. It was a military defeat for the Vietnamese communists, but it also forced millions of Americans to see the war was far from over. Mistrust of the government skyrocketed, and anger about the war polarized the nation. Anti-war protest scenes like this dominated news reporting. Many sympathized with the police, seeing protesters as longhaired agitators rebelling just for the sake of it. Others sympathized with the protesters, seeing them as draft-age young people exercising their rights in the face of strong-arm tactics by the police. Both sides had ample evidence to back up their views.

Illustration 2

Millions of Americans had doubts about the war, but few agreed with the small radical fringe active in the anti-war movement. After 1968, the key radical student group, Students for a Democratic Society, adopted an extreme Marxist rhetoric. Students at Columbia University and elsewhere took over administration buildings. At the University of Wisconsin, three radicals blew a building up, killing a researcher. Many radicals not only opposed U.S. involvement in the war, they openly favored a communist victory—as did American actress Jane Fonda on a famous visit to North Vietnam. At home, the antiwar movement fueled a broader cultural revolt, including a new, militant feminist movement led by women such as Gloria Steinem. She is seen here in Illustration 2B announcing the forming of the radical Women's Action Alliance in 1972.

Illustration 3

But radical protest was not the only form of protest. A growing number of well-known and well-respected figures in American life were voicing their displeasure with the war. One of the most outspoken was the famous pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, shown here in 1965 leading a march to the United Nations to demand a cease-fire in Vietnam. Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy ran for the Democratic nomination for president in 1968 on one issue—that the Vietnam War was morally wrong. He lost the nomination. However, his campaign gave a huge boost in credibility and legitimacy to the growing anti-war movement.

Lesson 1—The War at Home

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. The 1968 Tet Offensive was a turning point in the war, as was Lyndon Johnson's decision not to seek reelection. Another turning point took place later that summer in Chicago. From your history reading, can you explain what happened there and why it was a turning point in America's involvement in Vietnam?
2. In this illustration, marshals are removing a protester during a march on the Pentagon in 1967. What point of view, pro or con, does this photo seem to convey regarding the anti-war protests? Why?
3. The upheaval in Chicago led millions of Americans to decide that the war had created a real political crisis at home. Was this in fact the case, or did the national TV coverage of the protest exaggerate its political significance? Explain your answer.
4. Many anti-war protesters obeyed the law. Others turned to violence. Was their rage due only to the war itself, or do other factors explain the student upheavals of the late 1960s? Explain your answer.

Follow-up Activities

1. Imagine you are a high school history teacher. One of your units is on the Vietnam War. You decide you want to teach the students more about the protests that occurred here in the United States during the war. Your task is to find two photos of student protests, one of which you feel depicts the police as the sources of violence and disorder and one that you think depicts the protesters this way. As a class, discuss your choices. In your discussion, talk about the power of photographs to shape the way we view historical events.
2. During the war, many young men of military age chose to avoid the draft and Vietnam by fleeing to Canada. Most said they were against the war on moral grounds. But many other Americans say these men avoided their duty while someone else went to war instead. Imagine a meeting years later between someone who went to Canada for this reason and someone who served in Vietnam. Create an imaginary dialogue of their meeting.